

PARADIGMS AND PARADOXES IN THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ECOTOURISM

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ABSTRACT: In 2020 and 2021, the entire evolution of human society is under the sign of a paradox, of the adversity of events, coming in avalanche. The tourist evolutions themselves suffer the imprint of the paradox. These paradoxes urgently require new paradigms, the famous ‘paradigm shifts’, mentality, optics, action. The purpose of this research is to outline the main aspects of the research problem and diagnose the situation, with focus on identifying hypotheses for future descriptive or causal research as well as to explore the reasons, attitudes and values of the paradigm and paradox, which differentiate the two notions approached: testing new concepts of forecasting, a product specific to the destination under analysis and in identifying other viable, sustainable alternatives and their analysis in parallel with modelling and promoting new ideas of tourism products or services, respectively improving the existing ones. This article aims to capitalise on the paradox, already successfully applied in economics by the author of the method and in shaping and delimiting ecotourism (in particular the ecotourism from the destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat), emphasising the role of self-contradiction of the field, through a specific type of economic reasoning, in which the rapid evolution of tourism risks are becoming its own cause of its disappearance, knowing that too much tourism kills tourism. Responsibility and the mesological spirit are the only ways to counteract the paradox phenomenon, even a paradigm in the metamorphosis of ecotourism.

KEYWORDS: paradigm, paradox, sustainable tourism, development, ecotourism

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Introduction

The methodological basis for the research was initiated in 1980 in the form of the concept of sustainable human development and the paradigm was launched in 1990, as “the idea of adopting the concept of sustainable development in tourism was born in the early 1990s, thus creating sustainable tourism as a branch that has quickly taken on importance in both academic and research fields and in tourism industry.” (Stoian, Voinea 2007).

The core of the ‘sustainable tourism’ paradigm is a close cooperation between all parties involved in the tourism industry as well as their education. Therefore, we consider it appropriate to call this paradigm of tourism as ‘smart tourism’, given its establishment in a broader contemporary paradigm—Homo Intelligens, designed to develop present generations as intelligent people, able to manage resources in favour of optimisation of its profits, taking into account the interests of future generations. In fact, the concepts

of 'sustainable tourism' and 'smart tourism' are organically linked. For example, it is emphasised in the contemporary literature (Boluk et al. 2019; Easterlin et al. 2010; Eijgelaar et al. 2010; Hall et al. 2012; Higham, Lück 2007; Mihalic et al. 2021; Saarinen 2021) that 'sustainable tourism' reflects three important aspects:

1. Quality – sustainable tourism provides a valuable experience for visitors while improving the quality of life of the host community and protecting the environment;
2. Continuity – sustainable tourism ensures the continuity of the natural resources on which it is based and a continuity of the culture of the host community with satisfactory experiences for visitors;
3. Balance – sustainable tourism ensures a balance between the needs of the tourism industry of environmentalists and the local community.

Only by changing mentality, a value system, attitudes towards nature and people is it possible to achieve these aspects. In other words, 'sustainable tourism' involves the development of 'smart tourism'.

Another argument to denote the paradigm of present and future tourism as 'smart tourism' is based on the change of production technologies, in general, from industrial to information technologies, including in the tourism industry. We note that the tourism industry continues to develop based on the market economy. In this context "sustainable tourism means the ability of the tourist destination to remain competitive, against all the problems that arise, to attract visitors for the first time and to retain them later, to remain culturally unique and to be in a permanent balance with the environment." (Mazilu 2012). For this reason, tourism should also be 'smart'.

In addition, the specificity of the present and future tourism paradigm is under the impact of contemporary megatrends in the world economy (Ashworth, Page 2010).

Increasingly used in the common language, the paradigm, unanimously recognised as a unanimously accepted mental construction, which has provided a community or a society—for a long time—with the basis for creating a self-identity (research activity for example) and thus for solving problems or tasks. Synonyms of

paradigm, such as: habit, change, new model and teaching are just a few.

The term 'paradigm shift' was introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The idea is that "almost any significant progress in the field of scientific research is, first of all, a break with the old traditions, with the previous ways of thinking." (Covey 2011).

Paradigms gather in time a multitude of habits, in relation to which you are not even your own creator, but which, consciously or unconsciously, coordinate every move you make.

That is why in the process of replacing an old paradigm, which you want to 'get rid of', it is imperative to give birth, to conceptualise a new one (certainly, this takes/requires both time and effort, including acceptance and the work).

The paradigm in tourism nuances the complex set of notions, concepts related to tourism consumption, beliefs, traditions, examples and norms as an ideal that must be followed either by a culture, a rule or a society. Starting with the 1960s, the term was introduced in scientific research, as well as for studies of epistemology, pedagogy and psychology. In science, marketing, including tourism, the paradigm serves from a more practical level represented by the discovery of new areas of research, an approach to other ways to obtain training and the information needed to solve problems in a given situation.

The paradox coexists in any social field, where we notice that a situation in which there are two ideas, elements, phenomena etc., although they should be mutually exclusive, coexist (according to the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language [DEX]).

Becoming a literary current and even a scientific method of interpreting reality, paradoxism is a term introduced by the mathematician and logician Florentin Smarandache (Smarandache 2012, 2017), as an anti-totalitarian protest against a society placed in autarchy or almost complete isolation, as Romania was in the 1980s, when cultural and scientific values were manipulated and material values were apparently held by a single group of people whose ideas and needs had absolute priority and political impact. Already at the ninth international conference, paradoxism has become an avant-garde movement not only in literature, art, philosophy and science, but even in tourism, based on the excessive use of antitheses,

antinomies, contradictions, oxymoron variants, parables and paradoxes in creation, widening its sphere through counter-time elements (Săvoiu 2013, Săvoiu et al. 2015, Săvoiu et al. 2017), counter-sense and through contradictory experiments in science and various activities. Tourism, in general, reveals an increasingly visible and impactful paradox in its experimental expressions and even in its successes.

Sustainability has departed from being an abstract concept to penetrating the minds of tourism entrepreneurs who are beginning to germinate around the world. This is corroborated by the experiences of those who practice the activity in Romania and especially in the ecotourism destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat, in relation to the challenges and the market. Is it a trend that requires environmental awareness or is awareness becoming a trend? Both combine in ecotourism, which appears as a paradigm focused on sustainability, conservation and appreciation of the environment. The International Society for Ecotourism (TIES) defines this form of tourism as ‘a responsible journey in natural areas that preserve the environment and improve local well-being’.

This article aims to reflect on the current validity of ecotourism and sustainable tourism. To this end, we reviewed the evolution of ecotourism in the ecotourism destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat to know the current state of the issue and to propose a set of reasons or arguments that justify the need to apply the sustainable paradigm in the development of tourism.

This research aims at a general objective which is to propose a unitary and specific vision of an ecotourism destination, capable of modeling various factors that explain the attitude of ecotourists as consumers of ecotourism products or services and to combine this responsible custody of the environment with respect for life and authentic social and cultural development of local communities.

The proposal consists in the validity of the vision model of an ecodestination Țara Hațegului – Retezat, extended with the construction of subjective norms, to explain not only the behavioural intention of ecotourists as consumers of products or services but also the involvement of local communities. The ecotourism paradigm is based on the need to respect the environment and the

communities in which it is implemented. And, from an intercultural perspective, this model presented in antithesis the ecotourism reality in two territories, the ecotourism destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat and the National Park of the Central Balkans (Bulgaria), so that they can better put each other in the light.

Literature review

The paradox appeared in Romania as a sense of the nonsense elaborated by the Romanian mathematician, logician and writer Florentin Smarandache in 1983, being preceded by the interwar generations of the recognised ‘Denial’ of Eugen Ionescu and of Dadaism with Romanian origins. Starting from the paradox applied in scientific research, it broadens both the scope of research and especially clarifies the limit or adjacent areas of phenomena subject to the action of laws succeeding in generating original concepts, innovative techniques and methods (Lynn 1997). The paradoxes in tourism are inextricably linked to tourist itineraries, although they extend to other components of the tourism system (Minca, Oakes 2006). Thus, these paradoxes are dual expressions, sometimes appealing to authenticity, sometimes to inauthenticity, sometimes to active attitude, sometimes to passivity, sometimes to freedom and autonomy, sometimes to captivity and predetermination (Miller 1990).

The sustainable development paradigm has been institutionalised worldwide in the vast majority of productive sectors. Tourism is no exception to this phenomenon. Today, tourism incorporates and widely accepts the paradigm of sustainable development (Vera et al. 1997; López Palomeque 1999; Cănoves et al. 2006; Gough, Scott 2007; Vera et al. 2011; Hughes et al. 2015; McDonnell et al. 2020).

This is how the sustainability paradigm is present in the content of development policies and programmes of international and national organisations, such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Torres 2012; Gupta 2017; UNWTO, 2020).

The ‘sustainable development’ paradigm was born in the 1960s (Torres 2010), when the negative impacts of economic growth on the environment began to be identified and questioned, spurred

by an industrial production mode (Castells 1997). One of the theses that gained importance in those years is the one that states that the exponential population growth curve accelerates the loss of natural resources and degrades the environment (Torres 2012).

Thus, a situation that produces international concern is generalised, validating the existence of an environmental problem, which highlights the 'unsustainability' product of the industrial development model (Cañizares 2008). In response to this problem, the paradigm of sustainable development emerges, which highlights the following:

At the origin of the concept of sustainability there are two things: the perception of the seriousness of the environmental imbalances observed in different parts of the world and the awareness of the possibility of a global ecological crisis with unpredictable (but predictably catastrophic) consequences for the future of our planet and most of the species that inhabit it. The idea of sustainability is, therefore, a preventive response to the prospect of global or partial collapse of the mode of civilization that is dominant today (Fernández Buey 2005).

Therefore, the definition of sustainable development appeals to the existence of an environmental imbalance that puts the stability of the planet at risk. Therefore, the concept is developed from a preventive perspective, anticipating and reporting the impact that the overexploitation of natural resources can generate.

For Brand (2002), public concern about environmental issues in industrial societies has grown considerably since the 1980s and has caused a cultural polarisation between the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm. Environmental concerns have become institutionalised in education, economics, politics and research, as well as in advertising and in the lives of individuals. Respect for the environment and local culture, together with consensus and social agreement, can make sustainable development possible in the medium and long term (López, De Esteban Curiel 2010).

As a term, ecotourism, according to Weaver and Lawton (2002), appeared in Anglo-Saxon academic literature in the late 1980s and gained strength in the following decades. Weaver and Lawton (2007) also point out that ecotourism began to appear in international academic texts

in the 1980s and its importance has grown exponentially in the last 20 years. Ecotourism combines three essential criteria: firstly, it is a tourism whose first attraction is nature; secondly, in it, visitors relate to the natural environment through education; and thirdly, the tourist experience must be concentrated through practices that are ecologically, culturally and economically sustainable (Dragomir et al. 2018).

Finally, this concept is difficult to define, given that it has been used fundamentally in the practice of each of the investigations, so that, given the differences in both objective and subjective conditions, it implies that the concept is variable and, therefore, this variability is a characteristic feature of ecotourism (Wu, Carrasco 2017).

Materials and methods

Qualitative methods, such as Focus Group and in-depth interviews, used for the ecotourism destination in the study, were also used to identify the image characteristics of a destination, although some researchers argue that studies on the image of the tourist destination depend mainly on quantitative research, based on structured surveys. This research stage aimed at interviewing tourism stakeholders, local communities and tourists in the study area; the participants were selected in such a way as to cover as comprehensively as possible all stakeholders in the tourism process. The number of participants in each of the three focus groups varied between 7 and 12 participants. According to the literature, a focus group is valid if between 6 and 12 participants are present at the meeting, this being the reason why two group meetings were held. Such studies, carried out during 2020, mainly measured the cognitive component of the image of the ecotourism destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat, based on attribute lists (Tasci et al. 2007). Secondary data sources, such as general literature, brochures and interviews with local authorities, were also used in order to create the list of attributes used for the destination image and its measurement. At present, the study of the tourist market requires a very professional use of marketing research, which plays an essential role in marketing programmes because they provide the information needed to achieve them.

Results

The paradigms of ecotourism—the new existential philosophy of local communities—hosts and tourists arriving in the studied area, will be a starting point for generating new ways of approaching ecotourism activities, both in terms of economic development (the emergence of new jobs and new trades, the rebirth of crafts, the superior capitalisation of existing raw materials etc.) and sustainable development (care for the environment, preservation of resources and traditions etc.). Deciphering them will help to develop existential models, to change mentalities and to lay the foundations for an upward evolution of rural areas.

Ecotourism, in the paradigm of sustainable tourism, is part of all the elements of the *green economy*. Its success lies in its ability to develop at a faster rate than that of tourism practiced in its traditional forms. Ecotourism is able to contribute to meeting the demand for public goods with a low impact on the environment and without attracting other taxes, in some cases reducing even existing ones. In this perspective, ecological tourism respects the properties of natural spaces and maintains biodiversity by adapting to the specific characteristics of the environment. It is equally important for the protection of the social and cultural environment of local communities, through the participation of tourists in the activities of the population, through adaptation and integration. By promoting natural, cultural and 'soft adventure' tourism, local traditions and customs are highlighted without disturbing the lifestyle of the locals in the receiving areas. It is estimated that in the next two decades the growth rate of ecotourism investment will exceed six times the average rate of economic growth worldwide.

The potential for the development of ecological tourism lies largely in small and medium enterprises, which are those that organise most of the tourism programmes based on environmental conservation.

Taking this into account, governmental and international authorities can support the work of tourism enterprises which, in addition to participating in economic growth, contribute to the protection of the environment. The aid can be of a financial nature, by providing guarantees for bank loans, partial subsidisation of interest,

concluding public-private partnerships in case of investments in larger projects or providing assistance through entrepreneurial training, in the field of marketing and business administration. The common interest of economic agents active in tourism, the beneficiaries of tourism services and the local communities determines their concerted contribution to the conservation of ecological sites, environment and tourist destinations and economic support of tourist activity, in accordance with the principles of sustainable tourism, which regards tourism potential as a component of the environment.

In Romania there are currently important concerns for sustainable development, tourism and ecotourism, from:

- providers (owners of tourist pensions, custodians of natural monuments, administration of national and natural parks, owners of studs, artisans and folk artists etc.), randomly distributed according to the size of tourist flows;
- local associations (e.g. Agapia Community Tourism Association, Baltagul Câmpulung Moldovenesc Foundation etc.); and
- regional and national associations (e.g. the Romanian Ecotourism Association, the National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism).

The paradox of the evolution of ecotourism in Țara Hațegului – Retezat

The modern development of tourism brings both positive and negative reactions, thus raising concerns about the detrimental impact that millions of tourists have begun to have on the natural and cultural environment. This has led to the support of 'responsible' tourism as a viable alternative to the growing concerns associated with the rising popularity of mass tourism and has also led to an increase in all forms of responsible tourism, including ecotourism. However, there are critics who claim that the development of ecotourism can also bring a series of impacts on natural resources due to the fact that ecotourists try to discover new and undisturbed areas. Therefore, we can say that paradoxically, no matter what the intention, ecotourism also has the potential to destroy the resource it promotes. (Järviluoma 1992, Gray 1997).

As regards the **paradox of tourism and conservation**, there are many debates on the symbiotic relationship between these two aspects, often expressing the desire to be put into practice, but what more often prevails is the relationship of conflict or coexistence, thus remaining an open question with regard to whether or not to reconcile all these rival aspirations. Hence the paradox of the impact of ecotourism; although ecotourism serves the interests of tourism and conservation, there is a trace of scepticism about the veracity of these conservation interests, as to whether they are adequately served by the development of ecotourism.

As regards the **paradox of virgin places**, these are places 'discovered' by explorers, or experts/specialists, as they are also called. Those adventurous sleepers, with a high degree of curiosity and desire to explore, have a minimal negative impact on the sites and their number is relatively small. They are very different from tourists who are part of the category of 'recreational succession', those visitors who travel only in the promoted areas, also known as mass tourists. It is important to understand these concepts, because they depict the phases of visitors' movements and can contradict the principles of ecotourism. According to them, explorers discover 'untouched' sites and destinations and once this occurs, these new areas can fall into the stages of exploitation, stagnation, even decline. It can be illustrated by the example of Retezat National Park, initially discovered and explored by experts to become later one of the most visited protected areas in the country.

The current stage of capitalisation of the ecotourism potential in Țara Hațegului – Retezat

Out of an accommodation capacity of 358,119 in Romania, Țara Hațegului – Retezat represents

only 2.38%, i.e. about 8,531 places. In these structures, 194,245 arrivals and 383,496 overnight stays were registered in 2020, which represent 1.45% and 1.27% respectively, of the total arrivals and overnight stays registered in Romania (Table 1).

Following the estimates made at the level of the main protected areas in Romania in terms of visitor dynamics, we can see that Cheile Bicazului – Hășmaș National Park has the highest densities (76 visitors/ha), followed by Bucegi Natural Park and Vânători Neamț Natural Park with 10 visitors/ha each, while the Dinosaur Geopark Țara Hațegului registers two visitors/ha, and Retezat National Park registers less than one visitor/ha. The values also vary depending on the characteristics of the protected areas, the activities undertaken here, the tourist objectives present, the tourist infrastructure and last but not least the preferences of the visitors (Fig. 1).

The dynamic of arrivals and overnight stays of the regions, an analysis carried out at the level of 2020, highlights a similar trend for the two indicators for all regions; most arrivals and overnight stays take place in the CENTER Region, with 3,173,150 arrivals and 6,443,719 overnight stays. On the other hand, quite large differences, with values of 1,071,782 arrivals and 2,488,032 overnight stays, are observed in the WEST Region, and in the SOUTH-WEST OLTENIA Region, with values of 791,821 arrivals and 2,249,955 overnight stays, occupying the last positions in terms of arrivals and overnight stays among the Romanian regions (Fig. 2).

The situation presented is the result of an evolution that can be characterised as constant and intense in terms of growth trends in 2010–2020 in all regions, the difference being reported by the Bucharest-Ilfov Region, which recorded a downward trend in 2020 regarding tourist arrivals. With respect to the accommodation capacity

Table 1. Indicators for capitalising on rural tourism and ecotourism potential in 2020.

Indicator	UM	Romania	Țara Hațegului – Retezat	Percentage out of total
Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions	Number	8,610	313	3.64
Existing tourist accommodation capacity	Places	358,119	8,531	2.38
Tourist accommodation capacity in operation	Places – days	88,789,656	1,723,402	1.94
Tourist arrivals	Number	13,374,943	194,245	1.45
Overnights	Number	30,086,091	383,496	1.27

Source: own calculations based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics.

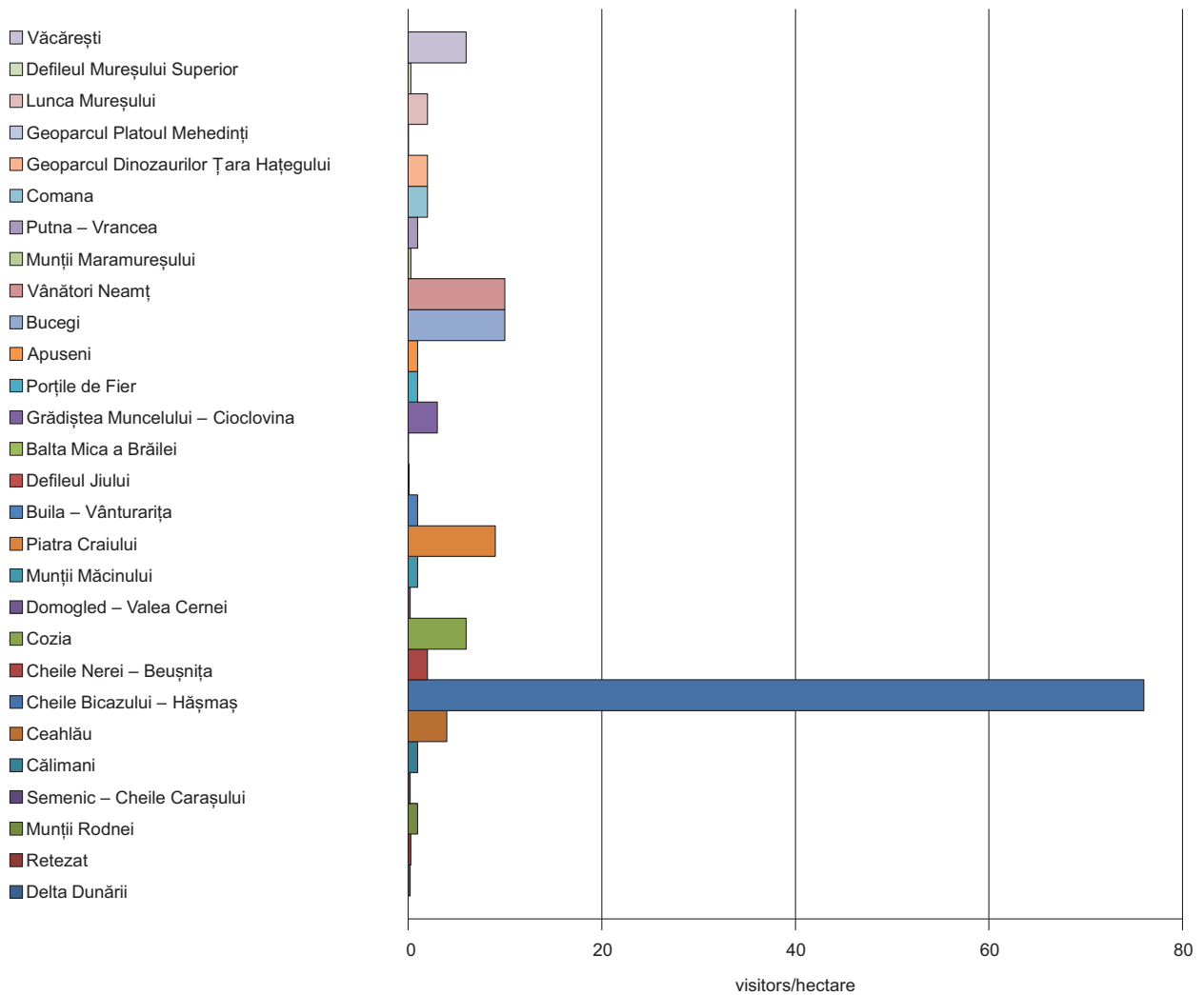


Fig. 1. Density of visitors in protected areas.

Source: own calculations based on estimates from the National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania 2019.

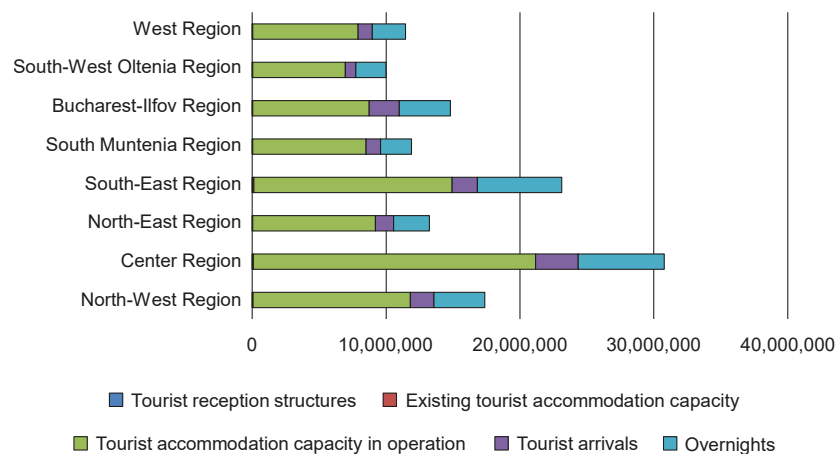


Fig. 2. The multicriteria hierarchy of regions.

Source: own calculations based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of ecotourism at the destination of Țara Hațegului – Retezat and at the destination of the Central Balkans National Park (Bulgaria) presented in antithesis.

	Țara Hațegului – Retezat	Central Balkan National Park
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retezat National Park – the largest nature reserve in Romania; - on the territory of Retezat National Park there is the deepest glacial lake in Romania, Zănoaga Lake and the largest glacial lake, Bucura Lake; - Retezat National Park – the first park in the country accepted as a member of PAN Parks (European foundation that aims to promote national parks as ecotourism destinations); - areas on the territory of this destination have been included in the UNESCO list; - Dinosaurs Geopark Țara Hațegului – UNESCO International Geopark, unique and remarkable land in Romania; - richness, uniqueness and diversity of the relief and the landscapes; - originality of the existing cultural heritage on the territory of the destination; - tourist routes that combine nature with geology, history, tradition and legends in the area; - development of tourism in the region by recognising Țara Hațegului – Retezat as a tourist area, mountains, 38 diversified tourist routes, cultural and historical monuments, accommodation capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the third largest protected nature reserve in Bulgaria; - unique nature and culture of local, regional, national and global importance; - favourable climate, relief and geographical location, which offers accessibility to natural and human resources; - comprehensive state policy for environmental management (Business concept for destination management for the Ecotourism Association in the city of Kalofer, Law for environmental protection, Strategy for cultural tourism, etc.); - Central Balkans National Park – became a member of PAN Parks and is also a PAN Parks certificate holder; - the national park and eight of the nine nature reserves are on the UN list of protected representative areas and four of the nature reserves are included in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves under the UNESCO Human and Biosphere Programme; - in 2006, the park was certified as a member of the Federation of European Wildlife and National Parks (EUROPARC); - in 2009, the National Park received the European Diploma in Protected Areas – the first and only in Bulgaria to receive the prestigious international award from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on protected areas of special European importance for the conservation of biological, geological and landscape diversity – award that evaluates the quality of the natural heritage and the effectiveness of the protection and management system.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poorly developed infrastructure: roads, water and sewerage networks, insufficient tourist routes, no natural gas supply network; - lack of public transport to allow tourists to travel to various tourist attractions; - surface and groundwater pollution; - insufficient promotion or lack of promotion of rural areas and specific products; - lack of centres of traditions and customs; - absence of regular cultural events; - absence of leisure infrastructure (leisure areas for all ages, children's playgrounds both outdoors and indoors, but also clubs, discos). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of experience in ministries for ecotourism development; - weaknesses in the mechanisms for imposing restrictions on negative impacts; - the existing infrastructure is not fully adequate; - insufficient services for visitors (small number of internet operators in rural areas, lack of road signs and signs in a foreign language, etc.); - poor quality of services in small villages due to lack of necessary qualifications and adequate education; - insufficient promotion of the region and the country as a tourist destination; - underdeveloped ecotourism products (underdeveloped market niches, insufficient loans of experience and foreign ideas).

	Țara Hațegului – Retezat	Central Balkan National Park
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the special and well individualized natural environment allows the development of tourism throughout a year; – destination development programme co-financed by a grant from Switzerland; – existence of the National Strategic Plan for Rural Development; – promoting local initiatives in tourism; – increasing financial support through European funds from the European Union for financing general and tourist infrastructure projects and environmental projects; – arousing an interest of other organisations for the exchange of good practices and experiences in the area; – promoting the culinary art specific to the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a means of stimulating the development of local communities; – possibility to comment on the lack of economic potential and economic activities in settlements where there are no basic production resources; – opportunity to improve sectoral employment of the population (balanced employment of male and female workers); – opportunity to multiply real jobs; – opportunity through ecotourism to create a complete national identity of the country in the marketing and advertising of Bulgarian destinations. Ecotourism is an opportunity to highlight Bulgaria's uniqueness for the development of new markets nationally and globally.
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – climate change; – inevitable natural hazards (danger of floods, falls of slopes, etc.); – water pollution due to uncontrolled discharge, but also lack of sewerage infrastructure in some communes; – irrational exploitation of resources and attitude of indifference to environmental protection; – migration of the labour force abroad, but also of tourists to better promoted areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – competitive domestic state policy objectives (In Bulgaria there are competing reciprocal needs for state support and financing of social security systems and education, development and improvement of rural infrastructure. The need to prioritise objectives may hinder the development of ecotourism); – natural disasters; – terrorism; – investment risk.

Source: edited by the authors based on data provided by the official websites of both destinations.

presented in the regional profile, the trend in the West Region oscillates and in the period of 2010–2020 the accommodation capacity presented both an evolution and a regression of the number of

places (Figs 3 and 4). However, unlike the accommodation capacity, the arrivals of tourists in the Western Region show an upward trend and in 2020 their number was doubled (Table 2).

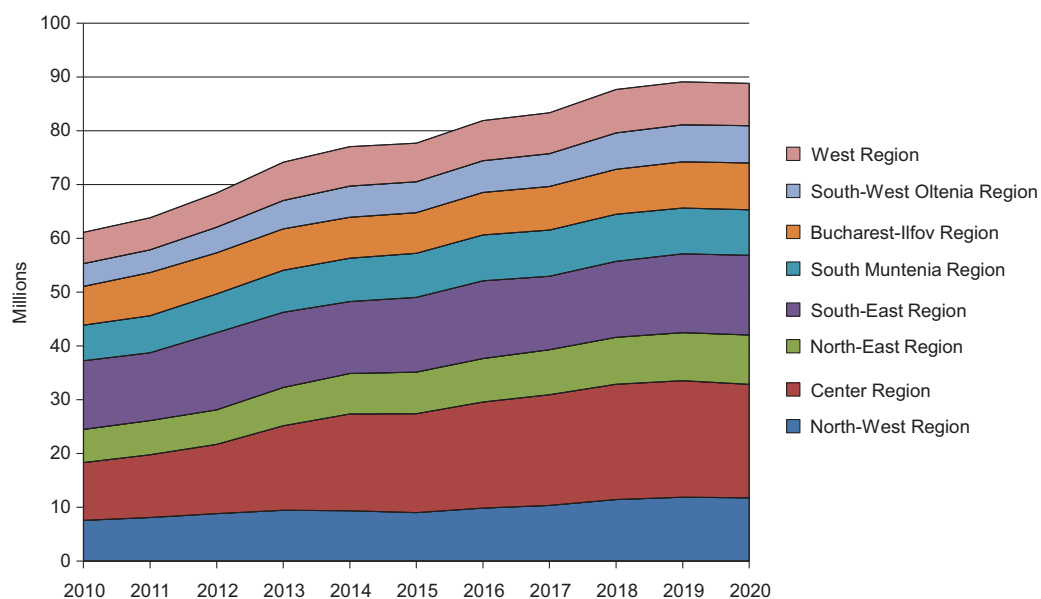


Fig. 3. Dynamics of accommodation capacity in regional profile.

Source: own calculations based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics.

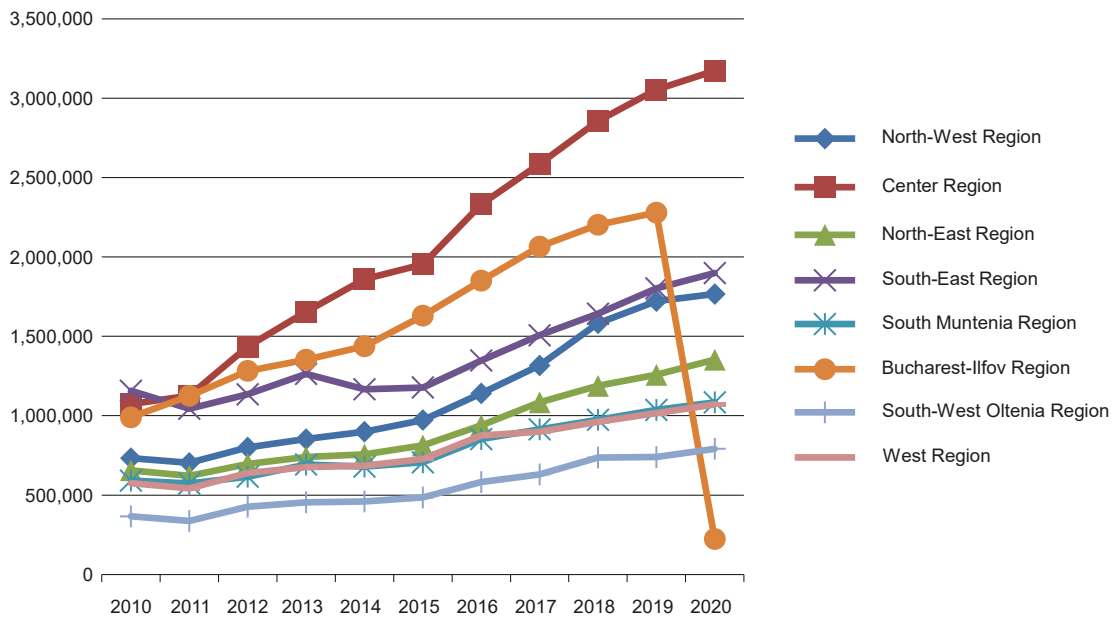


Fig. 4. The evolution of tourist arrivals in regional profile.

Source: own calculations based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics.

Discussion

Once the SWOT analysis in antithesis has been carried out, prioritising and selecting the most critical results, a comparison is made between the internal strengths and weaknesses with the external opportunities and threats, and we ask ourselves: with the strengths and weaknesses that we have today, how can we take advantage of the opportunities or stop the threats that we will have in the future? As a result, we will have the vision.

Vision – it constitutes a statement that guides the entity in a changing internal and external context. It is the image of what the institution wants to become in a long-term future scenario. This future shared and desired by the members of the institution is the starting point of strategic planning, which differentiates it from traditional planning, based on the past and present (diagnosis of reality). Not formulated means that the institution does not really know where it is going, what it will become or what aspect of the entity must change; neither does it know how to join the change. It constitutes the basis for the design of institutional objectives, political goals, strategies and plans. The Vision constitutes, therefore, the future Image that the entity should have. It must be inclusive, broad, achievable, active, realistic, encouraging, limited, consistent, widespread and flexible.

The destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat consists of three protected areas of national and international interest: Retezat National Park, Grădiștea Muncelului Natural Park – Cioclovina and Dinosaurs Geopark Țara Hațegului representative for ecotourism, which makes it the perfect candidate for the title of 'ecotourism destination'. All these criteria are the basis for the decision of the Retezat Tourism Association to propose the destination Țara Hațegului – Retezat to run for the title of ecotourism destination, this representing the main vision of 2014. The Vision became a reality two years later, when in 2016 Țara Hațegului – Retezat has become a certified ecotourism destination.

There is still much to explore and experience in our destination. Our vision is to promote the diversity of Țara Hațegului – Retezat with a main focus on social inclusion, sustainable development and environmental conservation and to demonstrate that this nationally certified destination is worthy of receiving certification from an international ecotourism certification system.

Our vision is expected to develop a tourism model that combines sustained growth and responsible environmental stewardship with respect to the authentic social and cultural life of local communities. However, all this cannot be immediate, and the process can be a long one, which made us think of a vision for 2024 (Fig. 5).

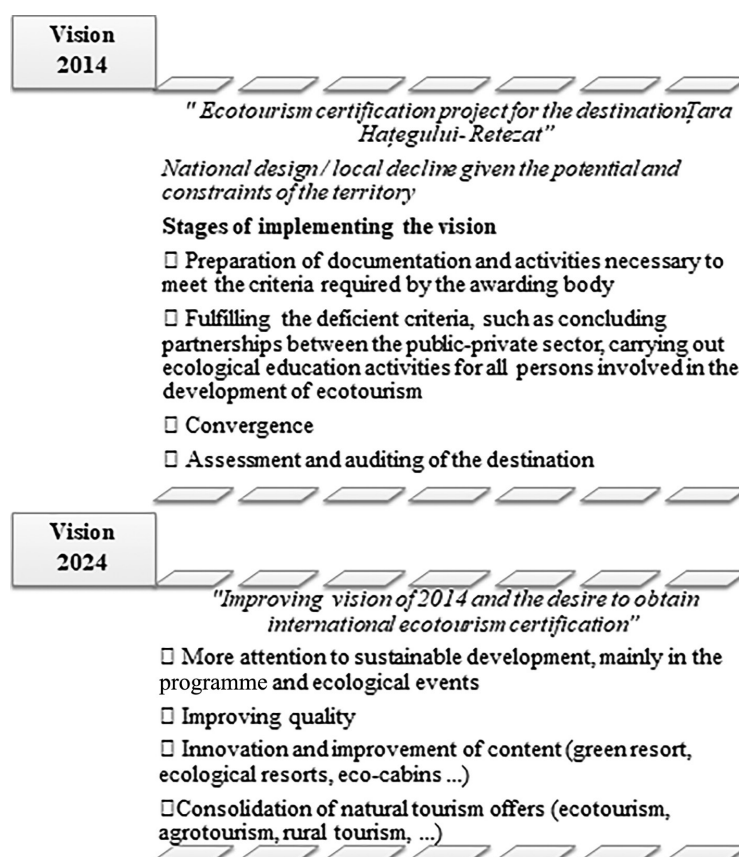


Fig. 5. Strengthening visions.

The Vision of 2024 must be carried out in a spirit of cooperation between the various organisations involved in this process: private and public, national and local. It must be based on an innovative approach to sustainability, based on a new generation of tourism products, long-term ecosystem management and local participation in tourism development and benefits (Fig. 6).

To ensure vision stability, the action plan should include certain challenges that will then be implemented, such as the following:

- capitalisation programme - to stimulate a more balanced distribution of tourist demand, reduce seasonality and generate jobs throughout the country;
- ecotourism routes - to improve cycling and hiking trails;
- sustainability for investments - to adopt environmental and social sustainability in licensing and public recognition of projects;
- innovation - to build the future of ecotourism in the area;
- guaranteeing the sustainability and conservation of the natural resources of Țara Hațegului

- Retezat, its authenticity and the well-being of its citizens;
- responding to the social and environmental sensitivities of tourists;
- taking advantage of the opportunity to make sustainability a distinctive feature for Țara Hațegului - Retezat.

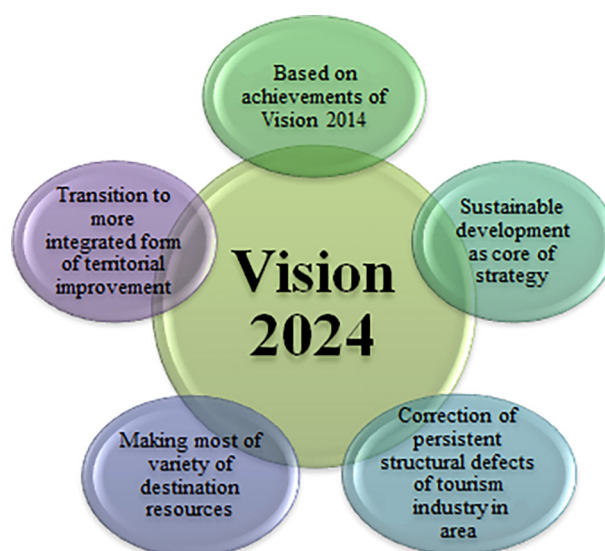


Fig. 6. Principles of Vision 2024.

Table 3. Typology of forms of involvement of local communities.

Tosun typology 1999	Pretty typology 1995	Arnstein typology 1971
1. Manipulative	1. Manipulation	<i>Coercive participation</i> top-down, passive, formal, mostly indirect, participation in implementation and sometimes in benefits, paternalism, manipulation, non-participation
2. Passive	2. Therapy	
3. Consultation	3. Information	<i>Induced participation</i> top-down, passive, formal, mostly indirect, manipulation, pseudo-participation, participation in implementation and benefits, choice between proposed alternatives
4. For material incentives	4. Consultation	
5. Functional	5. Reconciliation	<i>Spontaneous participation</i> top-down, active participation, direct, involvement in decisions, genuine self-planning participation
6. Interactive	6. Partnership	
7. Automotive	7. Delegated power	
	8. Citizen control	

Source: Tosun 2006.

Any lasting positive impact must start with ourselves and to make it possible this process must involve not only local authorities and stakeholders in the development of ecotourism in the area but also local communities; they must be included in the diversification process and enrichment of ecotourism offers.

A desirable approach would be one of active, and not manipulative, involvement – one carried out under the beneficial incidence of cooperation, consultation and interactivity towards a common goal: namely, the sustainable development of the tourist destination that caters to the economic self-sustainability of the population of the region (Table 3).

However, given the situation we are in, we can also talk about a vision for the recovery of ecotourism after the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, a vision that will help both tourism and ecotourism to emerge stronger and more sustainable from the COVID-19 crisis. In achieving this we can rely on the global guidelines of the World Tourism Organization to reset tourism. As such, the vision recommends the following lines of action to guide the responsible recovery of the tourism industry:

- the trust of tourists must be restored by providing services that offer them safety and security;
- adjusting epidemiological indicators in tourism connected with tourism monitoring mechanisms, which can help to better plan and manage it;
- strengthen public-private partnerships to ensure efficient implementation of recovery plans;
- 'innovation and sustainability as the new normal' – nature-based investments have the po-

tential to drive innovation and sustainability in tourism;

- sustainable food approaches by reducing waste and food waste;
- the use of new technologies to improve the performance of tourism both economically, socially and ecologically;
- financing tourism recovery, job protection, supporting small tourism businesses;
- combining hygiene with sustainability by using guides that will reflect the principles of sustainability, hygiene protocols and social distancing measures.

However, we can speak of an objective existence of this vision only if governments intervene and help implement these guidelines for the recovery of tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. NGOs (non-governmental organisations), international organisations, academia and civil society can support governments in making this vision a reality by imparting knowledge and supporting the development of best practices (One Planet Network 2020).

The national ecotourism strategy will not be complete without the development of measures to promote the ecotourism product both nationally and internationally. Among the main priorities of ecotourism marketing, the following can be listed as illustrations:

- creating a national ecotourism brand;
- tourist traffic monitoring;
- measuring the degree of satisfaction with the use of ecotourism products;
- developing new ecotourism programmes in order to improve the ecotourism experience;
- developing a marketing strategy.

The implementation of the National Ecotourism Development Strategy in Romania is a first

step towards supporting and developing a green economy in rural areas and within protected areas in our country, a long-term development designed to meet the needs of future generations (Portal Legislativ 2020).

Conclusion

Currently, the Romanian rural local communities do not sufficiently develop ecotourism activities; an exception is those areas with a valuable tourist potential, where rural tourism and agrotourism are mainly practised. In this sense, we believe that the European experience can be of real use to us. Ecotourism paradigms, European (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom) and global (North America, South America and Australia), must be used as an example and as a factor for the sustainable development of rural local communities in Romania.

Ecotourism, in the paradigm of sustainable tourism, is part of all the elements of the green economy. Its evolution is conditioned by the ability to develop at a higher rate than that recorded by tourism practiced in its traditional forms, currently in Covid times being the most requested form of tourist niche. Ecotourism is able to contribute to meeting the demand for tourist goods with a low impact on the environment. In this vision, ecotourism respects the properties of natural spaces and maintains biodiversity by adapting to the specific characteristics of the environment.

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